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OLD CHINESE—THE DERNIER CRI IN ART

By SARAH CLARK GOODMAN

(Formerly Mrs. J. Mitchell Clark)



Chinese Painting of the Ming Period. From the A. W. Bahr Collection
With its simple, clear and certain strokes it has all the "atmosphere" of a nocturne, even suggesting music

"THERE are none so blind as those who will not see" but it is a great Art to know how much to see and a greater one to know how little to see.

All artists seek to see Truth and to express it but to do this one must

"Deeper dive with the spirit-sense
Not with optics like yours."

(Browning says in his wonderful poem called "House.")

The ancient Chinese obviously achieved this art of seeing as no other artists ever have, as is evidenced by their perennial paintings which have lived through the centuries and are today the key to the "dernier cri" in painting.

Fundamentals in the training of Chinese artists were of paramount interest. The first was proper breathing. They contended that one cannot see normally unless one is healthy and one cannot be healthy unless one's respiration is perfect. This being the foundation the next consideration was observation.

Japanese artists of this day are emulating the ancient Chinese in never painting anything until they have observed the subject for days, weeks, and sometimes years, under all conditions until they feel they have mastered it—then they paint the memory of their strongest impression, or if they be not satisfied, they never paint it.

This explains so many Chinese and Japanese subjects portrayed—the pine tree for example—in a storm or a high wind, as the tree thus manifests its strongest character to the many observations of the artist.

The idea in a Chinese picture is the focal object which is scrupulously painted in “strokes,” each one of which has an individual importance in portraying the *raison d'être* of the picture. Whatever is merely subjunctive to focal object, that such as background in the form of mountains, trees, rocks, etc., is only suggested.

It is really the depiction of Truth. For in verity the eye can only take in one focal object at a time and what surrounds it is dimly seen or sensed and should be limited to such expression; for nothing is so wearisome in a picture as detail painting, either in portraiture, where the focal point should be the face or in a landscape. I have a case in mind, where a woman insisted that the artist paint minutely the pattern of the lace on the gown she wore in her portrait, the expression of its value being superlative to any other consideration, destroyed the central interest!

The stroke which makes the Chinese picture is the subject of years of study with Chinese artists, as all their medium is laid on with a perfectly circular brush. By this means and with it they achieve their drawing, values and colour effect even in black and white.

Each of these strokes has a special significance and name, *i. e.* the rice-seed stroke, the chrysanthemum stroke, the wave stroke, the fish-tail stroke, the boat stroke and numerous others, and they are employed in every paint-

ing by means of the brush being held perpendicularly and rigidly between the thumb and forefinger, the action all taking place with the arm and forearm as the brush itself is never moved from its position.

A mis-stroke can never be corrected—therefore the true artist is the one who first visualizes the strokes in his subject, then executes them infallibly.

The best period of Chinese painting was before the fifteenth century—perhaps because up to that time no pictures were bought nor sold. Talent for painting was regarded as superhuman and priceless. One artist would present his work to another with a few lines of poetry accompanying it and the compliment was reciprocated similarly. With artists it was never how much money a picture would bring, but how much soul they could put into it. We might reach the highest in modern art if only the majority of artists were not perforce bread-winners!

Commercialism indeed robs the world of much attainment resulting from concentrated thought regardless of time—but even thus hampered modern art especially in France is trending toward the ethics of the old Chinese and painters are imitating this idea of a focal subject as was evidenced by the recent exhibition at Knoedler's by modern French artists, particularly in the canvasses of Monet and the work of Cezanne. But their method of handling colour does not arrive at the simple and convincing “stroke” portrayals of the early Chinese masters, who in the fifteenth century, or Ming period, showed a successful and brilliant epoch in colour. Before that siècle their favourite medium was ink or monochrome.